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## Breaking News Analysis: The Future of the U.S. Political and Military Relationship with Egypt

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July 9, 2012 | Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

The Egyptian political system is currently undergoing significant change, although the outcome of this process remains subject to a great deal of uncertainty. There are numerous influential players involved in the struggle for political power, but the two that are of greatest interest at the present time are the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt's military leadership. Their values and any compromise struck between these organizations will have a major impact on the future of U.S.-Egyptian political and military relations. Consequently, the statements and actions of both groups need to be watched carefully while consideration must be given to any wrangling over the future of Egyptian foreign and defense policies.

The Muslim Brotherhood is an 84-year-old Islamist organization which has now emerged as Egypt's most important political party. Its fortunes have shown considerable instability since the ouster of long-standing dictator Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. After a massive win in a high-turnout, post-Mubarak parliamentary election, the organization's popularity declined, and it then suffered an especially serious blow when the Egyptian Supreme Court dissolved parliament on June 14, 2012. The Brotherhood rebounded somewhat when presidential candidate Mohammad Morsi won a mid-June election by 52 percent of the vote. This outcome is nevertheless shaky, since Morsi was only able to get approximately half the vote in an election in which an estimated 49 percent of Egypt's eligible voters stayed home and his opponent was widely viewed as a pillar of the old regime. Only around one-quarter of the population was therefore willing to support Morsi with their vote. Adding to Brotherhood concerns, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a decree severely limiting the powers of the presidency shortly before the announcement of

the election results. The SCAF based this decree on its status as the interim governing authority following the ouster of Mubarak. Thus, while the Muslim Brotherhood clearly has significant power in the new Egypt, no one within this organization can feel too secure at the present time.

The character and special role of the SCAF also bears some serious consideration as the world continues to observe the events Egypt as they unfold. The SCAF took power in Egypt in the aftermath of the Mubarak regime's use of deadly force against the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. The military's decision to abandon the president guaranteed a short revolutionary process which lasted only 18 days from the beginning of the demonstrations until Mubarak's ouster. Despite this dramatic set of events, the extent of the military's commitment to fundamental change remains unclear, and it is doubtful that a commitment to democracy was their most important reason for opposing Mubarak. Rather, the leadership of the armed forces may have based some of its response to the demonstrators on Mubarak's increasingly open advocacy for his son Gamal to take over the presidency when he eventually stepped down. Gamal was a wealthy investment banker without military service and was widely distrusted by the officer corps. The opportunity to get rid of him has loomed large to military officers as they contemplated their response to the demonstrators. Moreover, if getting rid of Gamal was the strategy, it clearly worked. The younger Mubarak is currently in detention with a trial for graft scheduled to begin in early July—while the SCAF officers delighting in his downfall are seeking to emerge as the heroic saviors of the nation.

The process of building a new Egypt may now have reached a turning point as the SCAF and Brotherhood consider each other with suspicion while trying to develop some sort of working relationship. While Morsi claims to "love" the military, this statement is difficult to take at face value. Since at least the 1981 Sadat assassination, Egyptian military intelligence has played an especially diligent role in preventing Islamist groups from infiltrating military ranks. Officers who appeared unwilling to separate politics from religion were often removed from the service. The SCAF, and more generally the organizational culture of the armed forces, is correspondingly profoundly suspicious of the Brotherhood, and this distrust helps to define red lines which the military will not cross while attempting to compromise in the current political machinations. These red lines appear to include the military's fundamental unwillingness to allow civilian interference in the internal management of the armed forces. The SCAF also wishes to protect the military's many financial investments and partial control of the Egyptian economy. These economic activities often have nothing to do with military requirements, but they are viewed as fundamental to the military's future. Despite potential problems with corruption and professionalism, large militaries in poor countries sometimes seek profitable activities to defray at least some defense costs.<sup>1</sup> Such

activities have a long history in Egypt and would be difficult to reverse since this revenue stream is virtually irreplaceable. Yet, even this financial empire may not be the military's greatest concern. Rather, one of the military's brightest red lines was seen in a recent SCAF decree which demands military agreement before the country could be committed to war, a prerogative unthinkable in Western military establishments.

Another important red line for the military would have to be the preservation of the military assistance relationship with the United States. The Egyptian military currently receives \$1.3 billion in military aid from the United States, and this military assistance helps maintain it as a modern, professional force. The U.S. military cooperation program includes both weapons transfers and the necessary help to maintain current weapons and equipment. Joint training with the United States also helps to maintain Egyptian military effectiveness. Military effectiveness is important for both national defense and national pride. As a force entrusted to defend the country, the special role of the armed forces in Egyptian society is expected by the military and many within the public. Many, if not most, Egyptians view their country as a natural leader of the Arab World, and this leadership role would be badly compromised without the prestige of a large and at least theoretically capable military establishment. Under these circumstances, neither the military leadership nor the public would be comfortable allowing the armed forces to deteriorate into a force of bumbler armed with a grab bag of older weapons and equipment from whatever source is available.

So where does this leave Egypt? A weak Muslim Brotherhood is set to begin a long, tortured process of trying to expand its governing role while also reassuring a distrustful military that it is a reliable partner. If this was not a large enough set of tasks, the Egyptian president must also stabilize a declining economy, reassure international markets and aid donors, revitalize tourism, and meet the expectations of Egyptians who believe that the post-Mubarak era will be better. Egypt, unlike Iran in 1979, does not have the oil wealth to fund an era of xenophobia. Rather, the Egyptians need to remain part of the global economy. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that the Muslim Brotherhood will seek to force the military to de-emphasize the military assistance relationship with the United States or seek to alter the fundamentally pro-Western character of the military. Mosri has already emphasized that he will not renounce the peace treaty with Israel, and it is doubtful that he will antagonize the military over its much less controversial ties to the United States. It is even unlikely that the Brotherhood will confront the Egyptian public on social issues in ways which would become a barrier to continuing cooperation with the West. In this regard, Egypt has a strong Westernized elite that will react poorly to efforts to establish and enforce a harsh version of Islamic law that requires women to dress like Zorro (in the words of one Kuwaiti friend

commenting on women's rights elsewhere in the Gulf). Picking a fight over such issues would almost certainly not serve the Brotherhood's long term interests of gaining popularity within Egypt and reassuring the world community of its commitment to human rights.

Thus, one returns to the question of where this situation leaves the United States. Clearly, Washington would like to maintain cooperation with the Egyptian military if it continues to be an important force for regional stability and a supporter of U.S. counterterrorism policies. Moreover, the Egyptian military will probably continue to support these policies, since it appears able to maintain its autonomy for at least the short term. In the long term, there are no guarantees, but important reasons exist to assume that a positive outcome is still possible. Clearly, the Egyptian public is not supporting the Muslim Brotherhood because they are seeking a new kind of dictatorship. If it is to survive politically, the Brotherhood and other Islamist parties will have to show the public that they can manage the problems of government and improve peoples' lives through pragmatic policies. If they cannot do so, they will lose power in the next election. The Brotherhood's superb performance in the parliamentary elections and more modest, but still winning performance, in the presidential elections are not an indefinite harbinger of all future electoral contests. In both of these instances, the party benefited from an anti-Mubarak backlash that is expected to be less prominent in future elections. Moreover, they also had a significant organizational advantage generated by the years of functioning in a technically illegal status constantly in danger of government crackdowns. This advantage should erode over time as other more liberal parties become better organized, although, unfortunately, the reactionary Noor party may also improve at political organizing.

The current bottom line appears to be that Egypt is entering a period of considerable uncertainty in which the military is well-positioned to preserve its internal priorities and special role in political life. Mohammad Morsi, on the other hand, is extremely unlikely to become a president for life or fundamentally alter Egyptian foreign and defense policies. Any U.S. decision to write off Egypt at a time like this is both foolish and disloyal to our friends with the Egyptian political and military systems. It may also be unfair to democratic values and sensitivities since many Egyptians supported the Brotherhood because of its long history of opposition to dictatorship and its efforts to provide economic aid to the poor. The United States has worked with Islamist governments before in places such as Saudi Arabia, and it seems unwise to downgrade relations with Egypt so long as the elected government behaves responsibly and shows an ongoing commitment to democracy, including a willingness to step aside should it be defeated in a subsequent election. In this context, the autonomy of the armed forces means that the

Brotherhood will not be able to seize and retain power under a “one person, one vote, one time” scenario in which a presidential strongman consolidates his rule through the use of force. The ability to use decisive force to establish a new dictatorship is a capability that they do not possess. Their lack of such an option involving the use of repression gives the Brotherhood a powerful reason to behave in a legal and democratic manner throughout Egypt's difficult transitional period.

1. Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 45.

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